

Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Retreat Talks · 27 min read

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble, and fully self-enlightened one.

Now we've come to the end of the seventh day. We're well into the course, well adjusted, in fact, having a great time. How else could it be? I'm sure that those who will leave tomorrow will now regret bitterly that they will not be staying or have not stayed for the full eight weeks. The fact is that once you've got through the first seven days, you can actually keep going with very little effort.

It's also true that those staying for three weeks or more can train themselves to sleep less, down to three and a half or four hours a night. When a meditator does that, they experience the next three days similar to when they started, going through the healing torture of raising energy one more notch. If after five days they still feel exhausted during the day, then it's okay to go back to five and a half hours. The fact we can do with less sleep during a meditation course is because of the purifying effect and the transformative effect of the practice. The practice lets mental turbulences release themselves and transforms that violent energy into a pure calm flow as when water having bubbled and boiled over rapids transforms into a deep and powerful gentle river.

But why do this? Why do we have to lift energy? Because in so doing, we squeeze the hidden turbulence out of the system. Remember, this turbulence also turns inwards. It drags us down and causes us to feel that dullness and lethargy, as when water trapped is overgrown with weeds and often turns fetid and rank. But when we refuse to go down but stay awake, that deeper layer of turbulence begins to manifest as some form of mental turbulence. And so we can work with that deeper layer of our psychology. So though staying on for three weeks or more, let's see if we can lift our energy.

Now all this week we've been looking inward and trying to understand how suffering arises and how it passes away. Indeed, that is what we mean by *kamma*. You will notice, by the way, I am using the more common Sanskrit form of the word with the R, karma, which is now in the Oxford English Dictionary. In the Theravāda Pali script it doesn't have an R, kamma. But that aside, we need to understand the Buddha's teaching around karma so that we can take our practice into ordinary daily life.

First, it's important to understand the underlying philosophy of causality, cause and effect. As we all know, and as our science understands, nothing comes into existence without a cause. Nothing happens without causes. What happens is the effect, the consequence, of some past action or event. That's our usual understanding. Remembering our iconic toast, once that lever is pressed, we know the bread will be transformed. Equally, when one of those terrible diseases hits the animal population, mad cow disease or

foot and mouth, scientists set about searching for the cause. We sometimes go far back in time to understand the cause of present day events, such as an earthquake. We try to see our present psychological problems in terms of what happened to us in childhood, and so on.

The Buddha stated this in a very simple way. Literally, the Pali translates as, "Because that arose, this is now arising. Because that did not arise, this does not arise now." Here we have a more subtle understanding. We tend to look at karma only in the positive. This happened to me because that happened previously. I got my wages at the end of the week because I worked. But the negative is also true. I didn't make any money this week because I was sick and couldn't work. Because we do support a worthy cause, some benefit arises. Because we fail to do so, some benefit fails to materialize.

Now if everything that happens now is indeed caused by some past event, that suggests everything is set, predetermined, everything is fate. Where then would choice and free will figure? What's more, if indeed everything is determined by past events, where does creativity come in? Surely we'd be looking at a universe constantly repeating set patterns. The same cause and effect spinning around each other. A monotonous dance.

The Buddha points out that things also happen because of a conjunction, a meeting of various lines of actions that come from various past causes to create a single new event. Jung, the psychologist, called this synchronicity. Again, the Pali translates literally as "because this is, so that is, because this is not, so that is not." For a person to receive their wages either in hand or in the bank account takes a lot of things to come together from various sources. There's the amount of work done, the registering of it, which implies all the office work, the transfer of money, which implies all the banking system, and so on. I shall spare you the details of how a piece of toast ends up succulent on the tongue.

Here we have an understanding that is reflected in modern chaos theory. Dependent on supporting conditions, it may be that a flap of a butterfly wing in the tropics could eventually develop into a tornado in little old UK. That is, supporting conditions of weather patterns may come from different sources to conspire, as it were, to use that little flapping as a catalyst to create a catastrophe. By the way, I find it typical of our present-day gloom and doom that a positive spin could not be given to it. Conditions creating a great summer, for instance.

It is also important to take this understanding into our moral behaviour. A small act of kindness whirled by supporting conditions may bring an end to an age-old quarrel, an age-old war.

Now if it were true that the universe was only a confluence of unrelated events, different events totally unconnected with each other in the present and arising with no connection to the past, then we can imagine only chaos, real chaos. How could there be any coherence? Or if there were, it would be by mere chance, and then only for the occasional moment. Yet without these haphazard meetings, there can be no creativity. We may unexpectedly meet a friend and suddenly a choice arises whether to do something with our friend or carry on doing what we'd set out to do. I set out looking for work. Others are looking for

workers. Opportunities arise. Some improbable, some just up my street. Hopefully.

So to understand the picture fully, we need to blend these two positions together. Something happens now because the different parts of that event come from a structured past and because they happen to all come together at one and the same time. Even in this statement we do not catch the boggling complexity of the situation because what the term "structured past" fails to get across is the idea that every moment in that structured past was a similar confluence of various karmic lines.

There is the story of the boy who was drowning in a bog and the local poor farmer who saved him. The rich father of that boy wanted to give the farmer some money. The farmer would have nothing to do with it. So the rich man offered to give the poor man's son an education. As things turned out, the rich man's son was Winston Churchill and the poor man's son was Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin. When Winston Churchill fell ill with pneumonia, it was Fleming's penicillin that saved him, saved twice by the same family.

Here we see a graphic example of the interaction of two differing lines of past karma meeting to create unexpected results. What possible connection could there have been originally between the poor and the rich boy? There will be those who argue that this was the product of karma coming from a past life, and there may be some truth in that. But I tend to lean on the side of chance. Our general disposition is to try to make sense of everything, even if it does not solve the problem. To be sick and not know what is wrong with you is worse than finding out what is wrong but can't be cured. One learns to bear with it. Even if it's terminal, one can come to terms with it. But not knowing is an anxious and frustrating place for us to be. And as we shall see, there are other laws that really do bring that element of chance into our lives.

So here we have the basic law underlying the teachings of karma, the law of conditionality. Everything arises in the present moment dependent on past and present conditions. Nothing arises spontaneously of its own cause. There is nothing causeless in the relative universe simply because everything is related. You can see though that this is not a mechanical law, we don't live in a simple one-and-one-makes-two logical universe. There's something quite unpredictable about the universe and indeed about our lives as human beings. In fact, the Buddha said, if you were to try to work out your karma, it would drive you mad.

To give you a sense of what it's all about, I'd like to ask you to practice a little visualization with me. You'll have to close your eyes for this one, and imagine. Imagine there's a little puddle, and a tiny stone lands in the center of it. See how the waves expand outwards, hit the edge and flow back to the centre. And how this continues until the momentum slowly dies away. Now see that puddle showered with little stones of various sizes. Can you see the turmoil? And yet there's that underlying pattern. As waves criss-cross, there are new meetings, each wave affecting the other. Everything is interconnected.

Now take a large pool and place that puddle in some quiet little corner. Again see how the stone creates a wave that flows out to the edge and back again and also flows against that little puddle and affects all the wavelets there. Now shower that pool with stones of various sizes and again see the apparent turmoil and

the underlying structure.

Now take a large lake and place that pool with its puddle in a hidden corner and again watch that first wave splash out from the centre and make its way to the bank and back, again affecting all the waves in the pool with its little puddle. Again shower the lake with rocks and boulders. Oh, what a creation!

Now take a sea and again place that lake with its pond and puddle in some quiet corner. Again, see that first splash and the wave launching out to the surrounding beach, crossing over the lake, the pool and the puddle. And now again the sea is bombarded with pebbles, rocks and boulders. What mayhem!

And finally the vast ocean. Hidden somewhere is that sea containing the lake, the pool and the puddle. Again a great wave. Watch it flow outward and as it lifts the pool and the puddle it hardly affects them, so great is it. Both are simply lifted up in the great swell. And again so many swells.

And one last little thing. Focus again on that little puddle and notice that the turbulent which hits it does not penetrate. It only causes the inner water to vibrate as when we strike a balloon. And as you slowly zoom away, you notice it's intimately surrounded by lots of other little puddles. And one final observation. Waves are not water moving. It is simply a force that runs through the mass, causing it to rise and fall.

So now there's our image. It's a way of symbolizing how each of us are at a crossroads of lesser or greater confluences. And what we need to be very clear about is what constitutes karma, personal karma. That karma that has to be cleared up, purified and refined as a part of the process of becoming liberated.

We can take these images in various ways to see how intricately complicated the universe is. On the grand scale we can see the puddles as human beings, the pool, the society we create, the lake, the earth we live on, the sea, our galaxy and the ocean, the vast cosmos. Alternatively, we can take it on a more interactive human level, making the puddle stand for individuals, the pool for the family and relatives, the lake for our society, the sea for our culture, and the ocean for mankind.

Here we have used the word karma in a more popular way to describe how all things come to be, all cause and effect, but the teachings make a finer distinction. They point to five different laws. They equate with our own modern understandings.

The first are the physical laws of nature. Luckily, we live in a fairly benevolent climate. Some parts of the world suffer greatly from floods and droughts, and perhaps most dramatic of all in recent times, earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis. Yet even we in temperate climes are affected in all sorts of ways by the weather. How the cold and dark of winter keeps us indoors. At an extreme level some people suffer from depression because of light deprivation. It's the time we prefer to catch colds and flus. And then summer with its flowers and sun, more than occasional these days, happily. How we love to bask in the warmth. How a sunny day lays us out on beaches like pancakes, and so on. But it's much bigger than that, how dependent we are on that very sun, how inexorably tied up we are with the laws that govern the physical universe. Who knows what distant galactic explosion might not blast this puny little planet out of

existence. Not to talk of black holes. Now there I go being gloomy and doomy. Alternatively, it may remain a favoured place for the evolution of consciousness and simply die away gracefully with the rest of the universe.

In popular Buddhism, there is much confusion over this. Much like the monotheistic religions, people believe that storms and earthquakes and tsunamis are sent to us by our past karma, our sins. Not because there is some judging God doing it, but because of the lord of cause and effect, karma. There's a telling story, a later attachment to one of the verses of the Dhammapada, the collection of the Buddha's sayings. A ship suddenly stops in the middle of the sea. The wind suddenly drops. The captain and crew are mystified. Luckily, there's a group of monks on board who have supranormal powers. They sit in meditation and announce to all that the reason the ship has stopped is because of the bad karma of the captain's wife. It seems that in a past life she drowned many dogs, and there would be no sailing until she left the ship. Can you imagine how she felt? Worse was to come. How could she leave the ship in the middle of the sea? There was only one way for it, so they chucked her overboard. The wind blew, the ship quickly caught sail, and soon made harbour.

The next is concerned with the law of seeds, as it translates. This is anything to do with life, with biology. As for humans, that refers to our DNA. And here lies another regular misconception. It does say clearly in the discourses that the way we behave morally has an effect on the way we look. Hatred leads to an ugliness, love and joy to a beauty. But our dispositions are only one in a number of factors. The overriding factor must be our genetic makeup, which comes to us from a long history of evolution. So we should hardly feel that we're undergoing the consequences of a hateful heart in the past life, if we happen in this life to look like the back of a bus. So what is our actual true karma in terms of the process of awakening? It is how we deal with being plain or plain ugly. Even though ugliness and beauty are all to do with human convention, nonetheless they affect us. In the same way as ugliness, for instance, might lead to low self-esteem, beauty can lead to conceit, both unskillful, unwholesome. Ultimately, of course, how we look should not be of any consequence to us. But the fact remains, however, that the way we feel does have an effect on our looks. Not simply body language, but even the shape the face grows into can express a constant underlying mood. Depression or joy, for instance. Even so, the body we have is not something we have directly caused by our actions.

The third law is the law concerning the mind. Again, this tends to focus on how the mind works, how consciousness arises and contacts the world and so on, and especially the psychology of dependent origination we've covered. But implied, of course, is our relationship to the world around us. Was it a conscious choice to be born into the family we were brought up in? Did we make a decision to be born in this country and not another? How all overpowering on our minds and hearts, our personality and character is the family and society we are born into. The way we see things, talk about things, our opinions, even the very language we use has been pre-set, pre-determined for us. We are born into a set of values, a history, a culture and a civilization. We are profoundly conditioned by them. Indeed, how else

can we be human beings if not as members of a family and a country with all that that implies? Has it all been the result of my own personal past actions? Hardly. Yet here I am with an identity that firmly locks me into time and place. Again, there is some connection, but not necessarily because of a personal action, moral or otherwise. It may be just the way things came together.

Then there's the Dharma, often translated as the law or the norm, the truth as to the way things really are. Penetrating the world within, our feelings, thoughts and emotions, and the world without, living organisms and the material universe, are the spiritual truths that teach us about our relationship to this interior and exterior life. And within these teachings, that are only concerned to liberate us from suffering, lies the law of karma itself.

So what did the Buddha mean by karma, specific to the process of liberation? Karma here means action, what we do. It's not to be confused with the result of action, which is properly termed *vipāka*. But what is it that actually creates an action? Is it not will? Just consider what happens when we do walking meditation, or indeed anything on an intensive course like this. We first try to become aware of our intentions before we actually act them out. This has been a very important part of our training because usually we don't distinguish between the two. In ordinary daily life we rarely stop to consider an intention. As soon as the desire arises we tend to act upon it. Who would want to pause and note the intention to open a door once they've decided to leave a room? It's normally when we're in a state of doubt or conflict do we consider whether to respond to an intention or not. Usually we just react.

But until we've begun to meditate, we may not have realized the crucial role of will. For will is that power that brings something out of potential into the actual, within ourselves and into the world. If a thought comes to mind, I need not necessarily follow it. To cause it to continue means something has been added to the original impetus, the original stimulus. Perhaps an image of someone I dislike arises. I could just stop it there. Something must empower it to develop. Perhaps an idea comes to take a holiday in an exotic place. It could stop there, or I may end up right where I had imagined. What is it that empowered that desire in my mind to throw it into the world out there? That empowering is what the Buddha meant by will. And he goes so far as to say, "Disciples, it is the will, *cetanā*, that I call karma." So will is the power that brings potential into actual. It is that which conditions.

It is the will that has created this inner environment that we live in. It is the will that has created and is developing right now all our emotions and thoughts, and it is our will, our will to live, that keeps this body alive. It is activated in a conscious way when we deliberate, but it is active also in an unconscious way out of habit for the will itself is also conditioned. That's why we can teach ourselves to do something even when we're not watching. I'm sure you've experienced coming back from a daydream to find the mind happily noting rising, falling.

Now from an intention there arises through the empowering of will an action. Many actions form a habit. Many habits form a personality and character, and once you've got that, well, you've also got your destiny.

The crucial link in the chain is the movement out of intention into action, be it a thought, word, or deed.

So how does this psychology link in with the end of suffering? First let us remember that will does not have understanding, it's just a power. What guides our will is the way we see things. It is our understanding, deluded or wise, that commands the will to empower a desire. Although there are many times we perform neutral actions, such as tying up our shoelaces, a lot of the time we could ask ourselves whether something is skillful or not.

Now here, we must make a distinction between the moral and the skillful, the immoral and the unskillful. All of us have given up gross, immoral behaviour. Have we not? I mean, we're not about to kill or steal or tell whoppers. No doubt we infringe the moral law in some small aspects, little piccadillos, but nothing to get us in serious trouble with the police. But when it comes to skilfulness, well, we've a long way to go.

By *kusala*, skillful, wholesome, virtuous... The Buddha meant all those actions that lead us to the end of suffering, *Nibbāna*. The path leading to that liberation is always against the flow self would have us follow. Before the Buddha took his seat beneath the Bodhi tree, where he was to become enlightened, he put his bowl in the river and it flowed upstream. It's a metaphorical way to show that the path of enlightenment is against our self-conditioned will. There's a verse in the Dhammapada which says that those who are not mindful, not skillful, are as if dead. So beware, only dead fish go with the flow.

To turn that self-conditioning around and to follow the desires of the Dharma is what spiritual training is all about. The whole of spiritual training could be said to be the reconditioning of the will. For once the will is behind the desire to become enlightened, awakened, then it becomes known as *Dhammacetanā*, the will that follows the true law. What in Mahāyāna is called *Bodhicitta*, the mind bent on enlightenment. Now when that happens, the path is straightened up. No more side alleys, no more diversions, no more wanderings in the garden of lotus eaters. And this is when we come to understand the importance of renunciation in our spiritual practice.

Renunciation must not be confused with self-mortification if what we mean by self-mortification is to make ourselves suffer in order to get rid of suffering. The Buddha discovered that to be simply painful, ignoble and unprofitable. It gets you nowhere but into more suffering. Renunciation, on the other hand, is the practice of confronting unskillful will, unskillful conditioning. It's the process whereby we undo self-conditioning and create a dharma conditioning.

Today, lots of people diet. Why? Is it not to contain their greed? Say, for the few who truly have a weight problem, the reason most do it is to get back their youthful shape or to rein in their insatiable appetite. Such people are forever in that exhausting tug of war only the self can invent, at one time feasting as if there's no tomorrow, and then bloated and obese, dieting because there might very well not be. In olden days, when our society was more spiritually bound, dieting was called fasting. But the reason for fasting was not for worldly gains of health and beauty, but to tame the will to undo conditionings forged by greed.

The Buddha instituted for his order members and any lay member who wanted to increase their spiritual effort the rule not to take food after midday. We don't have to stop eating altogether to practice renunciation. For the reason is to let go of all conditioning of eating for greed and not for nourishment. Not to let go of food itself. This is the difference between renunciation and self-mortification. The self-mortifier blames his body for his greed and so denies the body what it needs. The renunciator blames attitude.

Take the bad habit of snacking. Rather than blame the body and go on long punitive diets, better to sit quietly with the craving and wait for it to pass. Or if that's difficult, put the mind onto something more skillful such as taking a walk. And that's the main reason for not eating after midday on this course, to investigate greed and to let it go. Remember, every time we let go of an unskillful conditioning, we also strengthen our will to follow the Dharma, our *Dhammacetanā*. And as I'm sure you've all experienced, there's the added advantage of being a little more awake in the evening.

The same practice can decondition any unwholesome habit we have. Just think how addicted we become to the TV. Now how to tackle that? Well, if you want to hit it head on, just sit in front of the box with a cup of tea and biscuit, and when your favourite programme comes on, don't switch the TV on. Just sit there and watch the inner programme. Now that's spiritual training.

And this is where our free choice really lies. Free choice here is not some anarchic behaviour, do as I want to do, when I want to do and how I want to do. That's how the self would have it. But we don't live in our own universe. We aren't creator gods. Choice arises when the possibility of two or more actions arise in a given situation. Most of our lives we have little choice. We have to get up to work, we have to go to bed to rest and so on. But there are many sorts of choices we do have to make. Some are trivial, to have tea or coffee, walk this way around the park. Some are practical, pragmatic, the best way to buy a house. But for the trainee, choices become important when there is an ethical or spiritual value to them. Ethics is concerned with the way we treat ourselves and other human beings, or living beings and the earth. Spiritual decisions are more personal and concern our own inner growth.

Once we've made a decision and empowered it, we've created an act of thought, word or deed. And whether we like it or not, there will be a result. So what we come to understand is that there is no absolutely free will and that ultimately our choices are whether to empower those thoughts, desires, intentions that lead to suffering or those that lead to the end of suffering. So that we can say that the process of awakening, of liberation as it shapes our characters and personalities is simply the switch from unwholesome habits to wholesome ones.

Here we come to the other core teaching of the Buddha concerning karma. Many people these days don't believe that. That's why there's an attitude of, well, if you can get away with it, all the better. Even in the Buddha's day, there was a famous teacher who said it was irrelevant what you did by way of good or bad deeds. Your karma, meaning your destiny here, was set. He said if you went down one side of the Ganges

and murdered, pillaged and created mayhem, or whether you came up the other side performing immense deeds of compassion, it would not make a blind bit of difference.

Now two of the great insights the Buddha had upon enlightenment were concerned with this sort of karma. The first was that he saw all his past lives and saw clearly how all the ethical and spiritual decisions he had made had led to his becoming a fully self-enlightened Buddha. And then he also saw beings moving from one realm to another according to their ethical and spiritual decisions. What had been seen first of all as a personal individual law was now understood to be a cosmic law. It was true for all beings.

Now here we seem to have a contradiction. At one time we are saying that the situation we find ourselves is not entirely of our own making. And you hear the Buddha seems to be saying as much. To clarify this situation we must understand that although the world out there has its own relative existence and reality it remains even when we are not here what we experience of it and how we relate to that experience is all of our own creation.

When we came here to join this course we all saw this building. No one will deny this building exists and has some objective reality yet did we see the same building? Is it not true that each of us had a different image, a different feeling, a different understanding of the place, even if only in delicate shades? In other words, Buddhism teaches that even if the world out there has some objective reality of its own, we only know it from our own subjective perspectives. What seems to have great beauty or meaning to one person strikes another as indifferent. Think of the arguments of modern art. Is it art or isn't it? Who knows? Well, we could say only the judges know. But then they only know for themselves. And if anyone has an opinion, well, that's their judgment. In this way, there can be no absolute objective standard in art existing out there in the universe that are only agreed conventions among human beings.

So it's not the situation we find ourselves in but the way we are in any given situation that is our karma proper, that karma that pertains to the process of liberation. Take one of those earthquakes. There will be some who go through the experience with utter horror and yet others with calmness. There was the case of a mother and child trapped beneath concrete. To keep her child alive, the mother cut her fingers and had the child suck her blood. Right there in the midst of that horror there can arise such selflessness and heroism, whereas no doubt others scream themselves to death.

There are people you meet who have to suffer terrible diseases and misfortune. Some are emotionally gnarled by the experience, embittered, self-piteous, humourless. A while back I remember there was a policeman who was shot and lost the power of his legs. It seems he made a valiant attempt to make sense of his life but eventually committed suicide. Yet we have the heroic example of many people cruelly paralysed in all limbs and yet still find life meaningful. I met someone who was so paralysed after a car crash, though happily he did recover. While lying there it came to him that his life was still, as he put it, authentic.

In other words, how we experience our lives is the way we have conditioned ourselves to experience our lives. Of course, our parents, family, culture and so on have had enormous influence in the way we see things. But, and it's hard for us to accept this, they actually only have influence. Yes, even as utterly vulnerable children, it is still our own decisions that make our conditionings. Ultimately, it is we who have made the internal decisions that have brought about our particular way of relating to the world. In the final analysis, then, we must take on the entire responsibility of our own perspectives and attitudes. And it is because of these perspectives and attitudes that we have created the inner environment in which we continue to live.

So when we feel unhappy, it's an utter waste of time to seek the solution out there, for the fundamental reason lies within our own hearts and minds. It is futile to seek someone to blame. At first this may seem unfair. How could I have known as a baby, as a child, or even as an adult? But what if it were not so? If indeed other people can make willful decisions that actually condition my inner attitudes? Then how could I ever change without having to change them also? Everybody whom I think has conditioned me, rather than influence my conditioning, and by implication all those who conditioned them and so on to all people, everybody would have to be liberated before I myself could attain that liberation. But when we see that others can only influence our decisions and that we alone are the sole creators of our deeds, then firstly we stop empowering people to dominate us and secondly we take full responsibility for our decisions and our own psychological conditioning. Now once we do that, we are on the noble path to liberation from all suffering, for we can purify our hearts and clarify our understanding, both necessary preconditions for the attainment of *Nibbāna*.

So now we've talked about the fundamental laws of conditioning how we live in uncertain times all the time for we do not know what lines of events will come together for us in any given moment that's indeed why the Buddha told us not to try to work out our karma it would drive us mad We talk to the many laws that affect us from nature to genetics, from psychology to family to society. We discuss the difference between morality and skillfulness, how the former is included in the latter, how skillfulness is the whole noble path that leads to liberation. We saw how the Buddha puts his finger so firmly on the role of will in our conditioning. And finally, how there is an underlying moral law within the universe that dictates that unwholesome actions will have negative effects and wholesome actions positive effects within our own psyches.

And it is upon this final note that we need to concentrate, especially in our daily lives. Why is it that so many people seem to get away with it and so many people don't seem to get their just reward? It is only when we look inwardly that we see there is a justice based on this moral law. Remember, the effects of one's actions outwardly can never be determined. There are too many variables. But inwardly, all our decisions are going towards creating an ugly or a beautiful environment. And just because a person may be good at suppressing their guilt, anger, fear and so on, doesn't mean they've escaped them. These turbulences, as our meditation makes so obvious to us, are always there, lurking in the depths, causing

slow havoc in the body. But worse, they are secretly skewing our perspective of the world, as Freud understood so well, so that we find ourselves falling again and again into the same old situations, the same old problems, the same old traps, the same old unsatisfactoriness. And it could all be so different. And it will be different once we take hold of this wild bull and begin to train it in the ways of the true law.

The Buddha warned us that the way is gradual. It's going to take some time. Think in terms of decades, not years. But although the path is hard, it should not be laborious. Think of the drudgery or training for an Olympic sport. Every day, for instance, rowers can train for six hours, and most of it rowing, that monotonous movement, forward, backward, forward, backward. They probably go through days of sheer boredom, I don't know, but they are fired with the will to win. That same drive to become awakened is called *saṃvega*, translated as a sense of urgency about our task, an enthusiasm. That's the feeling of *Dhammacetanā*, the will of the true law.

Though the path ahead of us is hard, tough, demanding real determination and stamina, yet there is a joy to it, a subtle joy, that suffuses the spiritual life, and that joy is hope. Hope is not expectation, rather expectation is hope with a date put on it. No, hope is the heart's secret delight when it is informed through faith and insight that there will be a time when we shall enter into that blissful peace and contentment of *Nibbāna*. It is this hope we should savour and from that heartfelt base we should express our wisdom, little though it may be, into the world. And in this way everything we do will be perfumed with love, compassion, joy or peace.

Let's pause here for a moment.

And so the connection is made between our training here on an intensive course and our training in ordinary daily life. If in our understanding there's a hair's breadth of difference between the two, that gap is a chasm that will greatly undermine our progress. The Mahāsi Sayadaw, reinforcing the words of the Buddha, moment-to-moment mindfulness is the secret of success, points to the essence of our practice, and that practice is full-time. Six hours a day just won't do. Save for the hours of sleep, not a moment should pass when we are not making that effort to be aware, a calm, bright attentiveness. That's all we have to do to become fully awakened. It's as easy as that and as hard as that. But do we have a choice in the matter? Is there any free will to be exerc

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.